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# The African Bird Club—20 years of working for birds in Africa

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L'African Bird Club fête ses 20 ans. À l'occasion du vingtième anniversaire de l'African Bird Club, son histoire et ses réalisations sont brièvement présentées. Conçu en 1992 et lancé en mars 1994 par un groupe de personnes avec un intérêt commun pour l'ornithologie africaine, le Club s'est rapidement développé et compte à présent environ 1.250 membres dans 92 pays à travers le monde, dont 42 pays africains. Son Bulletin semestriel au contenu varié et dont les articles sont examinés par des spécialistes, est devenu une publication respectée qui compte actuellement 256 pages en moyenne par an. Le site web, lancé en 1995, quand l'internet était encore à ses débuts, attirait initialement environ 500 consultations par mois ; en l'espace de dix années, les consultations ont augmenté jusqu'à 36.000 par mois. Des nouveaux éléments y ont régulièrement été ajoutés, parmi lesquels la base de données « African Bird Image Database (AFBID) », auquel plus de 900 photographes ont contribué > 21.000 photos de 2.127 espèces. Depuis ses débuts en 1996, le Fonds pour la Conservation a permis à l'ABC de financer une grande diversité de projets de petite à moyenne taille à travers l'Afrique. À la fin de 2013 > UK£150,000 avaient été versées à 161 projets dans 39 pays. Finalement, il convient de remarquer que si l'ABC est un Club florissant, c'est grâce à ses nombreux volontaires qui donnent le meilleur d'eux-mêmes.

## Origins

On 12 March 1994 some 180 people gathered at the Friends' Meeting House on Euston Road, London, for what was later described, in this Bulletin, as 'perhaps the largest-ever meeting in the UK to be devoted to African Ornithology'. The main business was to launch a new club that would focus on all things concerned with African birds and birding—namely, the African Bird Club. However, the origins of the Club go back to the summer of 1992, when a group of enthusiasts with a special interest in the continent first conceived the idea of a club that would do for the birds of the Afrotropical region what the Oriental Bird Club had done for Asia.

At the time there already existed several societies covering different parts of Africa, but no birding umbrella organisation for the continent as a whole. Recent political developments, not least in South Africa, meant that certain parts of the continent that had previously been difficult to access were opening up to visiting ornithologists, making it increasingly possible to consider the continent's ornithology as a whole, rather than a collection of self-contained sub-regions.

A launch committee was established under the chairmanship of Martin Woodcock (at the time deeply involved in producing the plates for the monumental *Birds of Africa*), with Richard Webb as Secretary and Gary Allport, Mark Andrews, John Fanshawe, Lincoln Fishpool, Paul Green, Annie Harrap, Peter Lack, Duncan Macdonald,

Rod Martins and Iain Robertson as its other members. The committee's first task was to define the Club's purpose. To this end, they drew up a series of objectives, which were later reproduced on the inside front cover of the first issue of the ABC Bulletin as follows:

'The ABC aims to: provide a worldwide focus for African ornithology; encourage an interest in the conservation of the birds of the region; liaise with and promote the work of existing regional societies; publish a twice-yearly colour bulletin; encourage observers to visit lesser known areas of the region; encourage observers to actively search for globally threatened and near threatened species; and develop a Conservation Research Fund'.

This statement of aims has stood the test of time—the only modification in 20 years has been the re-writing of the final aim as 'run the ABC Conservation Programme'.

## Membership

The committee next addressed the matter of recruiting a core membership to raise the capital needed to float the Club. To achieve this, they contacted everyone with a known interest in African birds, inviting them to subscribe UK£30 to become founder members: 191 did so by the time of the inaugural meeting in March 1994 and a further 88 joined before the Founder Member scheme closed at the end of the year. More than half of those 279 remain members to this day.

## **Executive Officers of the African Bird Club 1994–2014**

### **Chairman**

Martin Woodcock 1994–98  
Phil Atkinson 1998–2005  
Richard Webb 2005–08  
Keith Betton 2008–

### **Vice-Chairman**

Geoff Randall 1998–2000  
Keith Betton 2002–06  
Phil Atkinson 2008–10  
John Caddick 2010–14

### **Treasurer**

Colin Humpage 1994–97  
Jonathan Gibbons 1997–98  
Alan Williams 1998–2004  
John Caddick 2004–10  
Alan Williams 2010–13  
Stephen Pringle 2013–

### **Secretary**

Richard Webb 1994–96  
Bill Quantrill 1996–2002  
Julie Childs 2002–03  
Flip Bruce-Lockhart 2003–05  
Geoff Randall 2005–10  
Sue Walsh 2010–12  
Geoff Orton 2012–

By the time of the March 1994 meeting 376 people had joined as members (including founders). Numbers increased steadily from then on, passing the 800 mark in the first year and the 1,000 mark in 1996, before finally peaking at just over 1,300 in January 1999. Since then the total has decreased slightly and in recent years has mostly fluctuated around 1,250. Some 10% of members do not renew each year, to be replaced by a roughly equal number of recruits. Altogether, just fewer than 3,000 individuals have been members of the Club at some stage during its lifetime. A survey of why members choose not to renew their membership revealed that the two principal reasons were (i) financial and (ii) a decision not to plan further visits to Africa. Almost nobody left because of dissatisfaction with the Club.

Members have come from 92 different countries and from all five continents. From

Africa, we have had members in 42 countries including all of the mainland states except Libya, Lesotho, Guinea Bissau, Niger, Chad, Central African Republic and Equatorial Guinea. The 50 non-African countries include 24 in Europe, 19 in Asia, three in Latin America and two each in North America and Australasia. Special efforts have been made to enable African members to join via local payment arrangements and the supported and associate membership schemes.

With such a widely scattered membership, it was always going to be problematic to know how best to engage with members. The original intention was to organise regular meetings, in Africa as well as in the UK and possibly other European countries. In the UK a day-long programme has been arranged annually to coincide with the AGM, usually in London. These meetings have generally been successful but they have been accessible to just a small proportion of the membership. There have also been occasional evening meetings held in conjunction with local bird clubs. Arranging meetings in Africa has proved difficult. Members of ABC Council have attended all five Pan African Ornithological Congresses held since the Club was founded, and the 1998 International Ornithological Congress held in Durban, and these events have provided opportunities for some Club members from Africa and elsewhere to meet. But, otherwise, the logistics of organising meetings in Africa have proved to be beyond the Club's capabilities.

Another opportunity for Council members to interact with the broader membership is provided by the annual British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water (Figs. 1–2). ABC has manned a stand at the fair annually since 1994 and as the fair has expanded in size over the years, so increasing numbers of ABC members, from the UK, Europe, even Africa and elsewhere in the world, have visited the Club's stand.

### **Birth of the Bulletin**

The original assumption was that the main means of communicating with members would be via written publications, dispatched by post. Such publications, in the form of the twice-yearly Bulletin, have indeed proved important, although the internet has come to be at least equally so, which was unanticipated at the time of the Club's foundation.



**Figure 1.** The Club's stand at the British Birdwatching Fair, Rutland, August 1997, with Martin Woodcock (far left) looking on as the editors of *The Birds of Africa* sign copies of their work, left to right, Stuart Keith, Hilary Fry and Emil Urban, with (behind) Roy Hargreaves and Barbara Woodcock (photographer unknown)

Le stand du Club au Birdfair de Rutland, Royaume-Uni, août 1997, avec Martin Woodcock (à l'extrême gauche) observant les rédacteurs de *The Birds of Africa* signant des exemplaires de leur livre, de gauche à droite, Stuart Keith, Hilary Fry et Emil Urban, avec derrière eux Roy Hargreaves et Barbara Woodcock (photographe inconnu). Dès ses débuts, le Club a eu un stand au Birdfair, un événement annuel qui attire des milliers de « birdwatchers ».

The question of publications was inevitably high on the Launch Committee's agenda. An editorial subcommittee was set up to recommend the type of publications the Club should produce. Initially, it was envisaged that the Club would publish an annual, peer-reviewed journal and a separate bulletin containing news about the Club's activities and non-scientific material such as site guides and book reviews. However, this plan met with objections from the editors and publishers of journals such as *Ostrich* and *Malimbus*, who argued that there were already sufficient outlets for scientific papers. Thus, the idea of a journal was discarded, in favour of a twice-yearly Bulletin to include members' news and views, a round-up of recent sightings, species identification guides and site guides, with the possibility of publishing some scientific papers.

The Editorial Team then set about commissioning material for the first issue of the Bulletin, which was published to coincide with the March 1994 inaugural meeting. The fruit of their efforts was a 52-page magazine containing 13 articles, with features on specific species (ground hornbills *Bucorvus* spp. and Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex*) and groups of species (bulbuls of Upper



**Figure 2.** Founder member, launch committee member and former Art Editor of *Bull. ABC* Mark Andrews at the British Birdwatching Fair, Rutland Water, UK, in August 2005 (John Caddick)

Membre fondateur, membre du comité de lancement et ancien éditeur artistique du *Bull. ABC* Mark Andrews au British Birdwatching Fair, Rutland Water, Royaume-Uni, en août 2005 (John Caddick)

Guinea), a site of special interest (Mount Kupe in Cameroon), book reviews, recent ornithological news from Africa and an article by John Fanshawe summarising the birding infrastructure of all 61 countries and archipelagos included within the Club's remit.

Since then the Bulletin has gone from strength to strength. The first seven issues were produced by the editorial subcommittee, but as the workload increased it became clear that production was proving too big a commitment for a voluntary team working in their spare time. In 1997 a decision was taken to appoint a professional editor to manage the production, with the Editorial Board providing guidance. Guy Kirwan was appointed to this role, subsequently supported by Ron Demey, and since then they have together been responsible for bringing out on schedule 14 further volumes of ever-increasing size—a typical recent volume consists of 256 pages with more than 40 features and articles.

Over the years the Bulletin has filled an invaluable role in publishing a steady flow of new information about the distribution and behaviour of Africa's birds—additions to national lists, range extensions and even the discovery of new species. The first issue contained the 'unofficial background story' to the discovery, by Thomas Lehmborg and Lars Dinesen (both founder members of ABC), of Udzungwa Forest Partridge *Xenoperdix udzungwensis*, a species and genus new

to science (their first sight of it was of ‘two small chicken-like feet....at the bottom of the pot’ in which their evening meal had been cooked—the amazing story can be read in *Bull. ABC* 1: 24–25, available on the Club website if you do not have the original publication).

### **ABC on the web**

The Club first launched an internet site in May 1995, at a time when the web was still so much of a novelty that, in announcing the news to the membership in *Bull. ABC* 2(2), it was thought necessary to explain what the internet was! Our first website, containing brief background information about the Club and a downloadable membership application form, was shared with the three other UK-based international bird clubs, Oriental Bird Club, Neotropical Bird Club and the Ornithological Society of the Middle East. It initially attracted *c.*500 hits a month, a rate that grew to 36,000 ‘page views’ a month within ten years. By 1997, it had become obvious that the Club needed more capacity. So, in November 1997, we entered into a new agreement that gave us much-expanded web space and our own domain name, [www.africanbirdclub.org](http://www.africanbirdclub.org).

Since then the site has expanded with new features being added regularly. In September 2003 a secure payment facility was added to permit subscriptions and purchases of Club merchandise online. Next, a searchable database of African ornithological literature was developed and a start was made on constructing individual pages for every African country with detailed information on local services relevant to the needs of visiting birders plus information on the local avifauna. Later, in 2004, the quarterly African bird ID challenge was started and in 2005 the African Bird Image Database (AFBID) was launched as a joint operation funded by Bird Explorers and with help from Birding Africa. Within three months, 117 photographers had contributed 2,314 images of 930 species. Most recently, more than 900 photographers have contributed >21,000 images of 2,127 species. In 2008, ABC participated in the creation of a website devoted to African bird vocalisations, in partnership with Xeno-canto, which had previously developed a similar website of Latin American bird sounds.

Other features of the website have included downloadable checklists for every country in

Africa and translations of key pages into French and Portuguese. An e-mail discussion group, [AfricanBirding@yahoo.com](mailto:AfricanBirding@yahoo.com), initiated and moderated by ABC, has some 1,600 members and has proven very popular. It is used to disseminate new information quickly and acts as a question-and-answer forum for topics such as species identification and travel.

By 2012 the website was becoming more difficult to maintain, lacked a consistent structure throughout and was looking dated. A professional website development company was commissioned to construct a new website and to migrate all of the existing content, some 1,500 pages. This brought together all of the features of the previous site in a logically constructed, simple-to-navigate and easy-to-use site. The redesigned site became operational in March 2013.

Particular credit should be given to Alan Wilkinson, who set up the first website and steered it through the early years, and to Phil Atkinson and John Caddick who have developed it into the multi-featured resource that exists today.

### **Conservation**

From the outset, the Club’s founders were determined that ABC should not just be a club for people who wanted to observe and study birds in Africa, but that it should promote the conservation of birds and their habitats—that the Club should be seen to be, in the words of its logo, ‘Working for birds in Africa’. To this end, the Club has sought to increase awareness of threats to birds in Africa, to encourage people to visit some lesser known areas of the continent and to gather data about the state of birds in them, to support local birding and conservation organisations, and to generally promote knowledge of and concern for bird populations.

Specifically, the Club operates the Conservation Programme, financed via the Conservation Fund. Establishing such a fund was anticipated in the original statement of the Club’s objectives in 1994 and was formally launched at the 9th Pan African Ornithological Congress (PAOC) in Ghana in late 1996, with an initial allocation of UK£2,000 from the Club’s reserves, followed by another UK£8,000 in 1997. Since then resources have come from profits from sales of Club merchandise, donations from Club members and sponsorship by companies and individuals of selected projects.



**Figure 3.** The first ABC Conservation Tour group on the rocky escarpment, home to the endemic Angola Cave Chat *Xenocopsychus ansorgei*, overlooking Kumbira Forest, Angola, October 2005 (John Caddick). Subsequent tours have visited Gabon (2006), Rwanda (2011) and Zimbabwe and Mozambique (2012).

Le groupe du premier « ABC Conservation Tour » sur l'escarpement rocheux, habitat de l'endémique Cossyphé des grottes *Xenocopsychus ansorgei*, surplombant la forêt de Kumbira, Angola, octobre 2005 (John Caddick). Ces voyages ont pour but de visiter des endroits qui ne sont généralement pas inclus dans les itinéraires ornithologiques ; les organisateurs acceptent de céder une partie des bénéfices au Fonds pour la Conservation. Les voyages suivants ont visité le Gabon (2006), le Rwanda (2011) et le Zimbabwe et le Mozambique (2012).

ABC Conservation Tours (Fig. 3), initiated in 2005, have proved to be another useful source of funding. Under the scheme, tours are arranged to parts of Africa not covered by the standard African birding itineraries, with the organisers donating a share of the profits to the Conservation Fund. The fund has also benefited from income raised by local payment schemes. In countries where these have been established, subscription income in local currency has been used to finance in-country conservation projects.

The first expenditure from the fund was UK£800 to help pay for the attendance of Africans at the PAOC in Ghana. This was followed by a grant of UK£770 to the Ornithological Association of Zimbabwe, to help cover the costs of a training course for 15 A-level or undergraduate students interested in birds and their conservation. In 1998 seven projects were financed, covering a wide range of activities from environmental education to research on endangered species. Further projects followed as the programme gained momentum. By the end of



**Figure 4.** The ABC representative in Madagascar, Julien Ramanampamonjy (right), welcomes the Director-General of the Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests, and the Director for National Education and Scientific Research to the ABC stand at the Malagasy Birdfair in October 2006 (Julien Ramanampamonjy)

Le représentant du ABC à Madagascar, Julien Ramanampamonjy (à droite), accueille le Directeur général du Ministère de l'Environnement, Eau et Forêts et le Directeur de l'Éducation nationale et de la Recherche scientifique au stand du Club au Malagasy Birdfair en octobre 2006 (Julien Ramanampamonjy)

2006, ten years after its launch, >80 projects in 27 countries had been supported to a total value of more than UK£50,000. Since then the programme has continued to accelerate, thus by the end of 2013 >UK£150,000 had been distributed among 161 projects in 39 countries. Twenty-one awards totaling in excess of UK£31,000 were made in 2013 alone. Much of this has been made possible by the generous sponsorship of companies and private individuals—some 40% of expenditure in 2013 came from this source.

1999 saw the launch of the ABC / NHBS Book Awards, a collaboration between the Club and the Natural History Book Service whereby the latter provided up to five UK£100 vouchers annually for three years, to be redeemed against books from their catalogue, while ABC identified suitable recipients. Awards were made in the first year to Aride Island Nature Reserve (Seychelles), Makerere University (Uganda) and the Ethiopian Wildlife & Natural History Society. Altogether, 13 awards were made during the three years of the scheme.

Also launched in 1999 was the ABC Expedition award under which an award of UK£1000 was made available annually for ornithological

expeditions to or within Africa. Unlike standard awards, which are available only to residents of African countries, expedition awards are open to anyone. The first award, in 2000, supported the costs of a multidisciplinary expedition to the island of Annobón in Equatorial Guinea, undertaken by a joint team of Spanish and local biologists. Among other work, the team censused seabird populations and researched the habitat requirements of five passerine species endemic to the Gulf of Guinea islands.

Subsequent awards have included contributions to the costs of an Oxford University expedition in collaboration with the Rare & Endangered Species Trust to determine population densities of three vulture species in the Waterberg Plateau Park in Namibia, a Glasgow University expedition to study two rare endemics in southern Ethiopia in collaboration with the Ethiopian Wildlife & Natural History Society, and an expedition organised jointly by Cambridge University and the Society for the Conservation of Nature in Liberia to search for the Liberian Greenbul *Phyllastrephus leocolepsis*, a species known only from the type specimen taken in 1984.

For the development of the impressive conservation programme, we are much indebted to the members of the Conservation Committee, chaired initially by Rob Lucking (1998–2002), then by Steph Tyler (2002–10) and currently by Chris Magin.

### **The African Bird Club at 20**

That small band of optimists who in 1992 first dreamed of the ABC can look back with justified pride at the Club's achievements. Today, ABC is thriving and has three particular strengths: the Bulletin, the conservation programme and the website. All of this has been achieved largely through the unpaid efforts of the many volunteers who have given freely of their time to make the Club the success it is today. More than 60 individuals have at one time or another served on ABC Council. Others have helped man ABC stands

at bird fairs, promoted sales of Club merchandise and generally acted as ambassadors for the Club. And, we should not forget the contribution made by our overseas representatives—42 of them at the latest count, although others have also served in the past—working to maintain our membership, to keep us informed of developments in their countries and to offer support to visiting ABC members if requested. With support like that, there is no doubt that the Club will flourish for decades to come.

Finally a tribute to our Presidents: Martin Woodcock, who contributed so much to the Club in its early days and has maintained a close interest ever since, became the first President after stepping down as Chairman in 1998 and continued in the post for the full ten years permitted under the Club's Constitution. As his successor we are privileged to have Tasso Leventis, a Founder Member of ABC, a director of the worldwide Leventis Group of companies and an active participant in international efforts to encourage sustainable development.

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## **Corrigenda**

### **Bull. ABC 20(2)**

In the paper on 'Bird observations around Juba, South Sudan', Figs. 5–7 were transposed; Fig. 5 should be labelled 7, Fig. 6 should be 5 and Fig. 7 should be 6.

In the reference list of the same paper, 'Mallalieu, M. in press' should read:

Mallalieu, M. 2013. First records for South Sudan of African Cuckoo Hawk *Aviceda cuculoides*, Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina* and White-winged Widowbird *Euplectes albonotatus*, and first sighting of Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonora*. *Bull. ABC* 20: 71–74.